The Breadwinners

A SOCIAL STUDY

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CHAPTER XII—(Continued.)

Through these loitering and talking crowds Farnham made his way in the evening to the office which he kept, on the public square of the town, for the transaction of the affairs of his estate. He had given directions to his clerk to be there, and when he arrived found that some half-dozen men had already assembled in answer to his advertisement. Some of them he knew; one, Nathan Kendall, a powerful young man, originally from the north of Maine, now a machinist in Buffland, had been at one time his orderly in the army. Bolty Grosshammer was there, and in a very short time some twenty men were in the room. Farnham briefly explained to them his intention. "I want you," he said, "to enlist for a few days' service under my orders. I cannot tell whether there will be any work to do or not; but it is likely we shall have a few nights of patrol at least. You will get $10 a piece anyhow, and ordinary day's wages besides. If any of you get hurt, I will try to have you taken care of."

All but two agreed to the proposition. These two said " They had families and could not risk their skins. When they saw the advertisement they had thought it was something about pensions, or the county treasurer's office. They thought soldiers ought to have the first chance at good offices." Then they grumblingly withdrew.

Farnham kept his men for an hour longer, arranging some details of organization, and then dismissed them for twenty-four hours, feeling assured that there would be no disturbance of public tranquillity that night. "I will meet you here tomorrow evening," he said, "and you can get your pistols and sticks and your final orders."

The men went out one by one, Bolty and Kendall waiting for a while after they had gone and going out on the sidewalk with Farnham. They had instinctively appointed themselves a sort of bodyguard to their old commander, and intended to keep him in sight until he got home. As they reached the door, they saw a scuffle going on upon the sidewalk. A well-dressed man was being beaten and kicked by a few rough fellows, and the crowd was looking on with silent interest. Farnham sprang forward and seized one of the assailants by the collar; Bolty pulled away another. The man who had been cuffed turned to Kendall, who was standing by to help where help was needed, and cried, "Take me away somewhere; they will have my life;" an appeal which only excited the jeers of the crowd.

"Kendall, take him into my office," said Farnham, which was done in an instant, Farnham and Bolty following. A rush was made—not very vicious, however—and the three men got safely inside with their prize, and bolted the door. A few kicks and blows shook the door, but there was no movement to break it down; and the rescued man, when he found himself in safety, walked up to a mirror there was in the room and looked earnestly at his face. It was a little bruised and bloody, and dirty with mud, but not seriously injured.

He turned to his rescuers with an air more of condescension than gratitude. "Gentlemen, I owe you my thanks, although I should have got the better of those scoundrels in a moment. Can you assist me in identifying them?"

"Oh! it is Mayor Quinlin, I believe," said Farnham, recognizing that functionary more by his voice than by his rumpled visage. "No, I do not know who they were. What was the occasion of this assault?"

"A most cowardly and infamous outrage, sir," said the mayor. "I was walking along the sidewalk to me home, and I came upon this gang of ruffians at your door. Impatient at being delayed—for me time is much occupied—I rebuked them for being in me way. One of them turned to me and insolently inquired, 'Do you own this street, or have you just got a lien on it?' which unendurable insult was greeted with a loud laugh from the other ruffians. I called them by some properly severe name, and raised me cane to force a passage—and the rest you know. Now, gentlemen, is there anything I can do?"

Farnham did not scruple to strike while the iron was hot. He said: "Yes, there is one thing your honor may do, not so much for us as for the cause of order and good government, violated tonight in your own person. Knowing the insufficiency of the means at your disposal, a few of us propose to raise a subsidiary night patrol for the protection of life and property during the present excitement. We would like you to give it your official sanction."

"Do I understand it will be without expense to my—to the city government?" Mr. Quinlin was anxious to make a show of economy in his annual message.

"Entirely," Farnham assured him.

"It is done, sir. Come tomorrow morning and get what papers you want. The sperrit of disorder must be met and put down with a bold and defiant hand. Now, gentlemen, if there is a back door to this establishment, I will use it to make me way home."

Farnham showed him the rear entrance, and saw him walking homeward up the quiet street; and, coming back, found Bolty and Kendall writhing with merriment.

"Well, that beats all," said Kendall. "I guess I'll write home like the fellow did from Iowa to his daddy, 'Come out here quick. Mighty mean men gits office in this country.' "

"Yes," assented Bolty. "'Dot burgermeister ish better as a circus mit a drick mule."

"Don't speak disrespectfully of dignitaries," said Farnham. "It's a bad habit in soldiers."

When they went out on the sidewalk the crowd had dispersed. Farnham bade his recruits good night and went up the avenue. They waited until he was a hundred yards away, and then, without a word to each other, followed him at that distance till they saw him enter his own gate.

CHAPTER XIII.

A Busy Sunday for the Matchins.

Matters were not going on pleasantly in the Matchin cottage. Maud's success in gaining an eligible position, as it was regarded among her friends, made her at once an object of greater interest than ever; but her temper had not improved with her circumstances, and she showed herself no more accessible than before. Her father, who naturally felt a certain satisfaction at having, as he thought, established her so well, regarded himself as justified in talking to her firmly and seriously respecting her future. He went about it in the only way he knew. "Mattie," he said one evening, when they happened to be alone together, "when are you and Sam going to make a match?"

She lifted her eyes to him, and shot out a look of anger and contempt from under her long lashes that made her father feel very small and old and shabby.

"Never!" she said, quietly.

"Come, come, now," said the old man; "just listen to reason. Sam is a good boy and with what he makes and what you make——"

"That has nothing to do with it. I won't discuss the matter any further. We have had it out before. If it is ever mentioned again, Sam or I will leave this house."

"Hoity-toity, Missy! is that the way you take good advice——" but she was gone before he could say another word. Saul walked up and down the room a few moments, taking very short steps, and solacing his mind by muttering to himself: "Well, that's what I get by having a scholar in the family. Learning goes to the head and the heels—makes 'em proud and skittish."

He punctually communicated his failure to Sam, who received the news with a sullen quietness that perplexed still more the puzzled carpenter.

On a Sunday afternoon, a few days later, he received a visit from Mr. Bott, whom he welcomed, with great deference and some awe, as an ambassador from a ghostly world of unknown dignity. They talked in a stiff and embarrassed way for some time about the weather, the prospect of a rise in wages, and other such matters, neither obviously taking any interest in what was being said. Suddenly Bott drew nearer and lowered his voice, though the two were alone in the shop.

"Mr. Matchin," he said, with an uneasy grin, "I have come to see you about your daughter."

Matchin looked at him with a quick suspicion.

"Well, who's got anything to say against my daughter?"

"Oh, nobody that I know of," said Bott, growing suspicious in his turn. "Has anything ever been said against her?"

"Not as I know," said Saul. "Well, what have you got to say?"

"I wanted to ask how you would like me as a son-in-law?" said Bott, wishing to bring matters to a decision.

Saul stood for a moment without words in his astonishment. He had always regarded Bott as "a professional character," even as a "litrary man;" he had never hoped for so lofty an alliance. And yet he could not say that he wholly liked it. This was a strange creature—highly gifted, doubtless, but hardly comfortable. He was too "thick" with ghosts. One scarcely knew whether he spent most of his time "on earth or in hell," as Saul crudely phrased it. The faint smell of phosphorus that he carried about with him, which was only due to his imperfect ablutions after his seances, impressed Saul's imagination as going to show that Bott was a little too intimate with the underground powers. He stood chewing a shaving and weighing the matter in his mind a moment before he answered. He thought to himself, "After all, he is making a living. I have seen as much as five dollars at one of his seeunses." But the only reply he was able to make to Bott's point-blank question was:

"Well, I dunno."

The words were hardly encouraging, but the tone was weakly compliant. Bott felt that his cause was gained, and thought he might chaffer a little.

"Of course," he said, "I would like to have a few things understood, to start with. I am very particular in business matters."

"That's right," said Saul, who began to think that this was a very systematic and methodical man.

"I am able to support a wife, or I would not ask for one," said Bott.

"Exactly," said Saul, with effusion; "that's just what I was saying to myself."

"Oh, you was!" said Bott, scowling and hesitating. "You was, was you?" Then, after a moment's pause, in which he eyed Saul attentively, he continued, "Well—that's so. At the same time, I am a business man, and I want to know what you can do for your girl."

"Not much of anything, Mr. Bott, if you must know. Mattie is makin' her own living."

"Why, Offitt, is that you? I did not hear you. You always come up as soft as a spook!"

"Yes, that's me. Where's Sam?"

"Sam's gone to Shady Creek on an excursion with his lodge. My wife went with him."

"I wanted to see him. I think a heap of Sam."

"So do I. Sam is a good fellow."

"Excuse my making so free, Mr. Matchin, but I once thought Sam was going to be a son-in-law of yours."

"Well, betwixt us, Mr. Offitt, I hoped so myself. But you know what girls is. She jest wouldn't."

"So it's all done, is it? No chance for Sam?" Offitt asked eagerly.

"Not as much as you could hold sawdust in your eye," the carpenter answered.

"Well, now, Mr. Matchin, I have got something to say." ("Oh, Lordy," groaned Saul to himself, "here's another one.") "I wouldn't take no advantage of a friend; but if Sam's got no chance, as you say, why shouldn't I try? With your permission, sir, I will."

"Now look ye here, Mr. Offitt. I don't know as I have got anything against you, but I don't know nothing fur you. If it's a fair question, how do you make your livin'?"

"That's all right. First place, I have got a good trade. I'm a locksmith."

"So I have heard you say. But you don't work at it."

"No," Offitt answered; and then, assuming a confidential air, he continued: "As I am to be one of the family I'll tell you. I don't work at my trade, because I have got a better thing. I am a reformer."

"Yes. That's all right. Does she pay you for her board?"

"Look here, Mr. Bott, that ain't none of your business yet, anyhow. She don't pay no board while she stays here; but that ain't nobody's business."

"Oh, no offense, sir, none in the world. Only I am a business man, don't want misunderstandings. So she don't. And I suppose you don't want to part with your last child—now, do you? It's like breaking your heart-strings, now, ain't it?" he said, in his most sentimental lecture voice.

"Well, no, I can't say it is. Mattie's welcome in my house while I live, but of course she'll leave me some day, and I'll wish her joy."

"Why should that be? My dear sir, why should that be?" Bott's voice grew greasy with sweetness and persuasion. "Why not all live together? I will be to you as a son. Maud will soothe your declining years. Let it be as it is, Father Saul."

The old carpenter looked up with a keen twinkle of his eye.

"You and your wife would like to board with us when you are married? Well, mebbe we can arrange that."

This was not quite what Bott expected, but he thought best to say no more on that subject for the moment.

Saul then asked the question that had all along been hovering on his lips.

"Have you spoke to Mattie yet?"

The seer blushed and simpered, "I thought it my duty to speak first to you; but I do not doubt her heart."

"Oh! you don't," said Saul, with a world of meaning. "You better find out. You'll find her in the house."

Bott went to the house, leaving Saul pondering. Girls were queer cattle. Had Mattie given her word to this slab-sided, lanky fellow? Had she given Sam Sleeny the mitten for him? Perhaps she wanted the glory of being Mrs. Professor Bott. Well, she could do as she liked; but Saul swore softly to himself, "If Bott comes to live offen me, he's got to pay his board."

Meanwhile, the seer was walking, not without some inward perturbation, to the house, where his fate awaited him. It would have been hard to find a man more confident and more fatuous; but even such fools as he have their moments of doubt and faltering when they approach the not altogether known. He had not entertained the slightest question of Maud's devotion to him, the night she asked from him the counsel of the spirits. But he had seen her several times since that, and she had never renewed the subject. He was in two minds about it. Sometimes he imagined she might have changed her purpose; and then he would comfort himself with the more natural supposition that maiden modesty had been too much for her, and that she was anxiously awaiting his proffer. He had at last girded up his loins like a man and determined to know his doom. He had first ascertained the amount of Maud's salary at the library, and then, as we see, had endeavored to provide for his subsistence at Saul's expense; and now nothing was wanting but the maiden's consent. He trembled a little, but it was more with hope than fear. He could not make himself believe that there was any danger—but he wished it were over and all were well. He paused as he drew near the door. He was conscious that his hands were disagreeably cold and moist. He took out his handkerchief and wiped them, rubbing them briskly together, though the day was clear and warm, and the perspiration stood beaded on his forehead. But there was no escape. He knocked at the door, which was opened by Maud in person, who greeted him with a free and open kindness that restored his confidence. They sat down together, and Maud chatted gayly and pleasantly about the weather and the news. A New York girl, the daughter of a wealthy furrier, was reported in the newspaper as about to marry the third son of an English earl. Maud discussed the advantages of the match on either side as if she had been the friend from childhood of both parties.

Suddenly, while she was talking about the forthcoming wedding, the thought occurred to Bott, "Mebbe this is a hint for me," and he plunged into his avowal. Turning hot and cold at once, and wringing his moist hands as he spoke, he said, taking everything for granted:

"Miss Maud, I have seen your father and he gives his consent, and you have only to say the word to make us both happy."

"What?"

Anger, surprise, and contempt were all in one word and in the flashing eyes of the young woman, as she leaned back in her rocking-chair and transfixed her unhappy suitor.

"Why, don't you understand me? I mean——"

"Oh, yes, I see what you mean. But I don't mean; and if you had come to me, I'd have saved you the trouble of going to my father."

"Now, look here," he pleaded, "you ain't a-going to take it that way, are you? Of course, I'd have come to you first if I had 'a' thought you'd preferred it. All I wanted was——"

"Oh," said Maud, with perfect coolness and malice—for in the last moment she had begun heartily to hate Bott for his presumption—"I understand what you want. But the question is what I want—and I don't want you."

The words, and still more the cold monotonous tone in which they were uttered, stung the dull blood of the conjurer to anger. His mud-colored face became slowly mottled with red.

"Well, then," he said, "what did you mean by coming and consulting the sperrits, saying you was in love with a gentleman——"

Maud flushed crimson at the memory awakened by these words. Springing from her chair, she opened the door for Bott, and said, "Great goodness! the impudence of some men! You thought I meant you?"

Bott went out of the door like a whipped hound, with pale face and hanging head. As he passed by the door of the shop, Saul hailed him and said with a smile, "What luck?"

Bott did not turn his head. He growled out a deep imprecation and walked away. Matchin was hardly surprised. He mused to himself, "I thought it was funny that Mattie should sack Sam Sleeny for that fellow. I guess he didn't ask the sperrits how the land lay," chuckling over the discomfiture of the seer. Spiritualism is the most convenient religion in the world. You may disbelieve two-thirds of it and yet be perfectly orthodox. Matchin, though a pillar of the faith, always keenly enjoyed the defeat and rout of a medium by his tricksy and rebellious ghosts.

He was still laughing to himself over the retreat of Bott, thinking with some paternal fatuity of the attractiveness and spirit of his daughter, when a shadow fell across him, and he saw Offitt standing before him.

"You don't say!" exclaimed Saul. "I never heard o' your lecturin'."

"I don't lecture. I am secretary of a grand section of Labor Reformers, and I git a good salary for it."

"Oh, I see," said Saul, not having the least idea of what it all meant. But, like most fathers of his kind, he made no objection to the man's proposal, and told him his daughter was in the house. As Offitt walked away on the same quest where Bott had so recently come to wreck, Saul sat smiling, and nursing his senile vanity with the thought that there were not many mechanics' daughters in Buffland that could get two offers in one Sunday from "professional men." He sat with the contented inertness of old men on his well-worn bench, waiting to see what would be the result of the interview.

"I don't believe she'll have him," he thought. "He ain't half the man that Sam is, nor half the scholar that Bott is."

It was well he was not of an impatient temperament. He sat quietly there for more than an hour, as still as a knot on a branch, wondering why it took Offitt so much longer than Bott to get an answer to a plain question; but it never once occurred to him that he had a right to go into his own house and participate in what conversation was going on. To American fathers of his class, the parlor is sacred when the daughter has company.

There were several reasons why Offitt stayed longer than Bott.

The seer had left Maud Matchin in a state of high excitement and anger. The admiration of a man so splay and ungainly was in itself insulting, when it became so enterprising as to propose marriage. She felt as if she had suffered the physical contact of something not clean or wholesome. Besides, she had been greatly stirred by his reference to her request for ghostly counsel, which had resulted in so frightful a failure and mortification. After Bott had gone, she could not dismiss the subject from her mind. She said to herself, "How can I live, hating a man as I hate that Captain Farnham? How can I breathe the same air with him, blushing like a peony whenever I think of him, and turning pale with shame when I hear his name? That ever I should have been refused by a living man! What does a man want," she asked, with her head thrown back and her nostrils dilated, "when he don't want me?"

As she was walking to and fro, she glanced out of the window and saw Offitt approaching from the direction of the shop. She knew instantly what his errand would be, though he had never before said a word to her out of the common. "I wonder if father has sent him to me—and how many more has he got in reserve there in the shop? Well, I will make short work of this one."

But when he had come in and taken his seat, she found it was not so easy to make short work of him.

Dealing with this one was very different from dealing with the other—about the difference between handling a pig and a panther. Offitt was a human beast of prey—furtive, sly, and elusive, with all his faculties constantly in hand. The sight of Maud excited him like the sight of prey. His small eyes fastened upon her; his sinewy hands tingled to lay hold of her. But he talked, as any casual visitor might, of immaterial things.

Maud, while she chatted with him, was preparing herself for the inevitable question and answer. "What shall I say to him? I do not like him. I never did. I never can. But what shall I do? A woman is of no use in the world by herself. He is not such a dunce as poor Sam, and is not such a gawk as Bott. I wonder whether he would make me mind? I am afraid he would, and I don't know whether I would like it or not. I suppose if I married him I would be as poor as a crow all my days. I couldn't stand that. I won't have him. I wish he would make his little speech and go."

But he seemed in no hurry to go. He was talking volubly about himself, lying with the marvelous fluency which interest and practice give to such men, and Maud presently found herself listening intently to his stories. He had been in Mexico, it seemed. He owned a silver mine there. He got a million dollars out of it, but took it into his head one day to overturn the government, and was captured and his money taken; barely escaped the garrote by strangling his jailer; owned the mine still, and should go back and get it some day, when he had accomplished certain purposes in this country. There were plenty of people who wished he was gone now. The President had sent for him to come to Washington; he went, and was asked to breakfast; nobody there but them two; they ate off gold plates like he used to in Mexico; the President then offered him a hundred thousand to leave, was afraid he would make trouble; told the President to make it a million and he wouldn't. His grandfather was one of the richest men in Europe; his father ran away with his mother out of a palace. "You must have heard of my father, General Offitt, of Georgy? No? He was the biggest slaveholder in the State. I have got a claim against the Government, now, that's good for a million if it's worth a cent; going to Washington next winter to prosecute it."

Maud was now saying to herself, "Why if half this is true, he is a remarkable man," like many other credulous people, not reflecting that, when half a man says is false, the other half is apt to be also. She began to think it would be worth her while, a red feather in her cap, to refuse such a picturesque person; and then it occurred to her that he had not proposed to marry her, and possibly had no such intention. As his stream of talk, dwelling on his own acts of valor and craft, ran on, she began to feel slightly piqued at its lack of reference to herself. Was this to be a mere afternoon call after all, with no combat and no victory? She felt drawn after awhile to bring her small resources of coquetry into play. She interrupted him with saucy doubts and questions; she cast at him smiles and glances, looking up that he might admire her eyes, and down that her lashes might have their due effect.

He interpreted all these signs in a favorable sense, but studiously refrained from committing himself, until directly challenged by the blush and simper with which she said:

"I suppose you must have seen a great many pretty ladies in Mexico?"

He waited a moment, looking at her steadily until her eyelids trembled and fell, and then he said, seriously and gravely:

"I used to think so; but I never saw there or anywhere else as pretty a lady as I see at this minute."

This was the first time in her life that Maud had heard such words from a man. Sam Sleeny, with all his dumb worship, had never found words to tell her she was beautiful, and Bott was too grossly selfish and dull to have thought of it. Poor Sleeny, who would have given his life for her, had not wit enough to pay her a compliment. Offitt, whose love was as little generous as the hunger of a tiger, who wished only to get her into his power, who cared not in the least by what means he should accomplish this, who was perfectly willing to have her find out all his falsehoods the day after her wedding, relying upon his brute strength to retain her then—this conscienceless knave made more progress by these words than Sam by months of the truest devotion. Yet the impression he made was not altogether pleasant. Thirsting for admiration as she did, there was in her mind an indistinct consciousness that the man was taking a liberty; and in the sudden rush of color to her cheek and brow at Offitt's words, there was at first almost as much anger as pleasure. But she had neither the dignity nor the training required for the occasion, and all the reply she found was:

"Oh, Mr. Offitt, how can you say so?"

"I say so," he answered, with the same unsmiling gravity, "because it's the fact. I have been all over the world. I have seen thousands of beautiful ladies, even queens and markisses, and I never yet saw and I never expect to see such beauty as yours, Miss Maud Matchin, of Buffland."

She still found no means to silence him or defend herself. She said, with an uneasy laugh, "I am sure I don't see where the wonderful beauty is."

"That's because your modesty holds over your beauty. But I see where it is. It's in your eyes, that's like two stars of the night; in your forehead, that looks full of intellect and sense; in your rosy cheeks and smiling lips; in your pretty little hands and feet——" Here she suddenly rolled up her hands in her frilled white apron, and, sitting up straight, drew her feet under her gown. At this performance, they both laughed loud and long, and Maud's nerves were relieved.

"What geese we are," she said at last. "You know I don't believe a word you say."

"Oh, yes, you do. You've got eyes and a looking-glass. Come now, be honest. You know you never saw a girl as pretty as yourself, and you never saw a man that didn't love you on sight."

"I don't know about that."

"Don't all the men you know love you?"

"There is one man I know hates me, and I hate him."

"Who is it? This is very interesting."

Maud was suddenly seized with a desire to tell an adventure, something that might match Offitt's tales of wonder.

"You'll never tell?"

"Hope I may die."

"It's Arthur Farnham!" She had succeeded in her purpose, for Offitt stared at her with looks of amazement. "He once wanted to be rather too attentive to me, and I did not like it. So he hates me, and has tried to injure me."

"And you don't like him very well?"

"I don't. I would owe a good deal to the man who would give him a beating."

"All right. You give me—what?—a kiss, or a lock of your hair, and he shall have his thrashing."

"You do it and bring me the proofs, and we will talk about it."

"Well, I must be off," he said, picking up his hat. He saw on her face a slight disappointment. He put out his hand to take leave. She folded her arms.

"You needn't be in such a hurry," she said, poutingly. "Mother won't be back for ever so long, and I was half asleep over my book when you came in."

"Oh, very well," he said. "That suits me."

He walked deliberately across the room, picked up a chair, and seated himself very near to Maud. She felt her heart beat with something like terror, and regretted asking him to stay. He had been very agreeable, but she was sure he was going to be disagreeable now. She was afraid that if he grew disagreeable she could not manage him as she could the others. Her worst fears were realized with his first words.

"Miss Matchin, if you ask me to stay longer, you must take the consequences. I am going to say to you what I never said to mortal woman before: I love you, and I want you for my wife."

She tried to laugh. "Oh, you do?" but her face grew pale, and her hands trembled.

"Yes, I do; and I am going to have you, too."

He tried to speak lightly, but his voice broke in spite of him.

"Oh, indeed!" she replied, recovering herself with an effort. "Perhaps I'll have something to say about that, Mr. Confidence."

"Of course; excuse me for talking like a fool. Only have me, and you shall have everything else. All that wealth can buy shall be yours. We'll leave this dull place and go around the world seeking pleasure when it can be found, and everybody will envy me my beauteous bride."

"That's very pretty talk, Mr. Offitt, but where is all this wealth to come from?"

He did not resent the question, but heard it gladly, as imposing a condition he might meet. "The money is all right. If I lay the money at your feet, will you go with me? Only give me your promise."

"I promise nothing," said Maud; "but when you are ready to travel, perhaps you may find me in a better humor."

The words seemed to fire him. "That's promise enough for me," he cried, and put out his arms toward her. She struck down his hands, and protested, with sudden, cattish energy:

"Let me alone. Don't you come so near me. I don't like it. Now you can go," she added. "I have got a lot to think about."

He thought he would not spoil his success by staying. "Good-by, then," he said, kissing his fingers to her. "Good-by for a little while, my own precious."

He turned at the door. "This is between ourselves, ain't it?"

"Yes, what there is of it," she said, with a smile that took all sting from the words.

He walked to the shop and wrung the old man's hand. His look of exultation caused Saul to say: "All settled, eh?"

"No," said Offitt; "but I have hopes. And now, Mr. Matchin, you know young ladies and the ways of the world. I ask you, as a gentleman, not to say nothing about this, for the present, to nobody."

Saul, proud of his secret, readily promised.

(To Be Continued Next Sunday.)